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SUBJECT: 5000 Tajiks Made the Hajj; It Wasn't Cheap

¶1. (SBU) Summary: This year, approximately 5000 Tajiks made the Hajj, accompanied by 100 interpreters, doctors, and expediters. Countries must apply to the Saudi authorities for spaces at the Hajj, and Tajik authorities initially underestimated the number of applicants they would have, creating bureaucratic confusion. While the Hajj is supposed to be a deeply meaningful religious experience, the process in Tajikistan has not escaped the endemic corruption that dominates the country. End summary.

¶2. (U) Over the past few weeks, we have spoken to a variety of individuals about the Hajj, including mid-level employees of the Ministry of Culture's Department of Religious Affairs; an inspector at the State Agency to Fight Corruption and Economic Crimes; opposition party members; a government-employed guide; and imams and worshipers at local mosques. Each described a flawed, corrupted process that takes away from the religious meaning of the event.

Government Control Means Plenty of Chances for Big Money

¶3. (U) The Tajik government regulates who can go on the Hajj, and it strictly controls all aspects of the three week trip. The Ministry of Culture's Department of Religious Affairs collects applications and all fees, and makes all flight and hotel arrangements. The Department chooses participants based on a set of factors; those who are under 18 are excluded, and preferences are given to those who have not yet made the trip. Most who apply are allowed to go.

¶4. (U) From 1991 to 2000, Tajiks were able to travel to Saudi Arabia by any means they wished. Since 2000, however, the Tajik Government gradually restricted Hajj travel, banning private arrangements and prohibiting private tour companies from participating. While the Government's stated aim was to prevent unscrupulous companies from bilking Tajik pilgrims, taking control of the Hajj was consistent with the Government's overall effort to exert greater control over religious practice.

¶5. (U) A corruption investigator described the many potential avenues for collecting bribes or kickbacks in the process. First, ensuring that you are on the list of approved hajjis involves paying off the local representative of the Department of Religious Affairs. Tajik Air is the exclusive carrier for the hajjis, and there is always potential to inflate the price of charter tickets, as well as to skim off some of the cash actually paid for the tickets. There are kickbacks for the hotels, as well as for the sacrificial animal that each Hajji is supposed to receive in Saudi Arabia.

Deputy Minister of Culture Shows How It's Done

¶6. (U) In 2006, two newspaper articles criticized Murodullo Davlatov, the Deputy Minister of Culture for Religious Affairs, and his associates for allegedly defrauding Tajikistan's 3500 pilgrims

of more than \$1 million. The newspapers asserted that the pilgrims each paid \$100 for a sheep to be slaughtered; but Davlatov had arranged for the slaughter of only 100 sheep, pocketing \$340,000. The articles also accused government officials of charging Hajjis higher rates for hotels than the hotels actually charged, pocketing the difference. There were also accusations that Davlatov and Tajik Air conspired to inflate the cost of the flight to Saudi Arabia. Davlatov and Tajik Air officials then split the illicit profits. One newspaper published a letter from a Saudi citizen to President Rahmon complaining about the corrupt officials who led the Hajj delegation.

¶16. (U) Hundreds of Tajiks try to find ways around the government restrictions. In 2006, some Tajiks from Ghaffurov and Isfara Districts bought Kyrgyz passports and traveled from Kyrgyzstan by bus. Several of them were stopped and detained by Uzbek border guards, who quickly determined that they were not Kyrgyz.

2007 - More People, More Opportunities

¶18. (U) According to Department of Religious Affairs employees, Davlatov's role in the Hajj diminished this year in light of past accusations. This does not mean, however, that the process has been cleaned up. The employees described how the Government of Tajikistan initially applied to the Saudis for 4000 spaces, after the Department of Religious Affairs estimated that few people could afford the \$2700 cost of the trip. The regional and district offices of the Department of Religious Affairs failed to inform the head office in Dushanbe in a timely manner about the actual number of applicants. By the time the late October deadline for applications rolled around, more than 5500 Tajiks had applied to go on the Hajj and paid their \$2700.

¶19. (U) Tajikistan requested 1500 additional places when government officials realized they had underestimated the number of hajjis, but the Saudis only granted 1000. This presented yet another opportunity for enterprising government officials - accepting bribes from hopeful hajjis to ensure that they were among the chosen 1000. One Department employee told us that just before the hajjis departed this year, representatives of the Ministry of Economics and Trade informally told the Department of Religious Affairs to return the \$120 fee for sacrificing a sheep to each hajji. The Department has thus far not complied.

You've Got The Job - As Long As you Play By the Rules

¶110. (U) There are also kickbacks in choosing the 82 interpreters and guides for the hajjis. Each Tajik escort will be paid more than \$1000 for three weeks' work, which is several times the average salary in Tajikistan. One of those chosen to be an interpreter said to us that many of the interpreters and guides will share their \$1,000 with the employees of the Department of Religious Affairs if they want to be included in the hajj campaign of 2008.

¶111. (U) Comment: The Department of Religious Affairs is as corrupt as any other part of the Tajik government. Its dishonesty and mismanagement of the Hajj gives religious activists a sensitive issue around which to build opposition to the present regime. Compounding the unhappiness over the Hajj process is the Government's inadequate response to the corruption - our contact with the Anti-Corruption Agency told us that investigators have found numerous irregularities, but no criminal reports have been filed, highlighting the Anti-Corruption Agency's weakness and lack of purpose. Lack of competence is one of the reasons why the Department of Religious Affairs failed to conduct an adequate public information campaign. Another could be that Davlatov wanted to ensure disorder to keep the number of hajjis low and to create conditions fostering kick-backs. In general, the administration of the Hajj in Tajikistan shows a government which cannot deal positively with religious practice, and which tends to exacerbate the problems (i.e., extremism) it aims to resolve. End Comment.